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New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 11th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. KITTIKHOUN (Lao People's Democratic Republic)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 87: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION (continued) (A/51/21, A/51/406)

1. Mr. BORGES (Cuba) said that the United Nations could not disregard the importance of the Fifth Conference of Ministers of Information of Non-Aligned Countries, held in September 1996; its Final Declaration (A/51/372) should serve as a basis for the formulation of the resolution to be adopted by the General Assembly. However, his delegation understood that other delegations did not wish to reopen the debate on the question, and therefore hoped that at its next session, the Committee on Information would make a more exhaustive study of the new world information and communication order.

2. His delegation supported the comments made by the representative of Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77. The constant advances in technology and its high cost impeded access to information by the developing countries, compounded the information gap between developed and developing countries, and increased the foreign dependence of developing countries. All that contributed to a distorted image of developing countries, which was contrary to their interests. The United Nations should seek mechanisms to encourage cooperation in information and communications between developing and developed countries and help eliminate imbalances.

3. Although the Department of Public Information had done good work, it must disseminate more information on decolonization, since there were still 17 Territories on the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories. Inadequate information was disseminated on the question of Palestine, and most of the provisions of General Assembly resolution 50/84 C had not been implemented, even though resources were available. United Nations information centres should be strengthened; it was clear that their merger with other United Nations offices had not been beneficial.

4. It was not acceptable that the technological superiority of the developed countries led to the imposition on developing countries of information policies which had no relevance to their interests. Subjective and distorted information was still being disseminated on the realities of developing countries; the United Nations must play a more active role in combating that form of colonialism. It was even more dangerous when information imbalances were accompanied by aggressive policies which violated independence and national sovereignty; Cuba continued to be the target of radio and television attacks by the Government of the United States of America in open defiance of the elementary norms of coexistence among States and the principles of international law, and despite repeated condemnation by specialized bodies and forums. His Government reiterated its right to respond to those illegal broadcasts with the means at its disposal.

5. Mr. SAMADI (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that because of the disparities between the developing and developed countries in communications infrastructure the developing countries were largely unable to disseminate information and communicate their views, while the world-dominating media did not respect their

cultural and moral values. His delegation supported the establishment of a new, just and more balanced world information and communication order and believed that a code of conduct had to be designed to regulate the flow of information, especially in the field of satellite broadcasting and the Internet, and eliminate violence and immoral material from cyberspace. The United Nations should play an active role in that respect.

6. His delegation noted with appreciation the ongoing efforts of the Department of Public Information, including the redesigning and expansion of the United Nations home page on the World Wide Web, but felt that the Department should continue to disseminate information through the traditional media and hard copies, since those channels remained the primary source for most developing countries.

7. His delegation shared the concern about the lack of attention paid to the issue of decolonization by the Department of Public Information; the United Nations home page did not provide any substantial information on decolonization. No budgetary constraints could justify stopping the issuance of press releases on the meetings of the Special Committee on decolonization, which should be resumed.

8. In connection with the proposal for an evaluation of the functioning of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, in paragraph 19 of draft resolution B (document A/51/21), his delegation felt that the selection process for the consultant should be open and transparent, and should afford developing countries an opportunity to be represented.

9. Mr. NDIAYE (Gabon) said that Gabon had established a National Council on Communications and Information, an independent body responsible for ensuring respect for the ethics of information and the democratic principles of a free, independent and pluralistic press. Radio stations and television channels operated freely throughout the territory of Gabon.

10. His delegation felt that the working methods of the Department of Public Information could be improved. In the area of meetings coverage, there was an imbalance between the use of French and English. Africa was very poorly represented at the intermediate and higher levels of posts, and there were very few French-speaking staff. While some French-language broadcasts were made by United Nations television, round tables were conducted mainly in English, even though some distinguished French-speaking personalities wished to participate in them.

11. The United Nations information centres played an important role in the dissemination of information, and Gabon therefore reiterated its request for an information centre at Libreville. Its establishment would be welcomed by students and by non-governmental and, above all, governmental bodies. Autonomous information centres had proved to be effective, given that UNDP had different objectives.

12. The United Nations press, radio and television services should be given the resources to enable them to use modern technology, compete and above all rapid transmission techniques; States Members should be able either to disseminate in

their territories broadcasts emanating from the Department of Public Information in New York, or to establish a channel exclusively devoted to United Nations information staffed by local journalists. That would enable the United Nations to play an effective role in strengthening international peace and security and engage in preventive diplomacy as envisaged in "An Agenda for Peace". The Department of Public Information must be given all the financial resources necessary to carry out its tasks.

13. His delegation supported the idea of an international code of conduct for the dissemination of information so as to ensure that the concerns of developing countries were fully taken into account.

14. Mr. GAMBARI (Nigeria) said that his delegation fully associated itself with the statement made by the representative of Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77. It commended the Department of Public Information for carrying out its functions effectively despite the decline in available resources. However, his delegation was concerned that the Department had stopped issuing press releases on the work of the Special Committee on decolonization, even though there were still 17 Non-Self Governing Territories on the agenda.

15. The integration of advanced information technologies by the Department was very timely; however, care must be taken not to leave out target audiences that might not be able to benefit from such services. A large majority of people in the global village could be further marginalized by lack of access to technological innovations. Most developing countries lacked the resources and technological capacity for the requisite information delivery, which constrained their ability to project events in their society promptly and effectively, and independently of tendentious media reporting in the developed countries.

16. It was a matter of concern that the salient objectives of the new world information and communication order had yet to be realized. The imbalances had increased because modern information technology was out of reach of the developing world. Nigeria had hosted the Fifth Conference of Ministers of Information of Non-Aligned Countries in September 1996, and strongly suggested that at its next session, the Committee on Information should take fully into account the outcome of that Conference as contained in document A/51/372.

17. As information technology was one of the most useful vehicles for political, economic and social development, it must be used rationally and responsibly. Bearing in mind the power of information as both a positive and a negative instrument of change, it must be ensured that information was accurate and objective all the time. In that context, the publication of Africa Recovery by the Department of Public Information had made important contributions in publicizing the needs of Africa and progress being achieved and had gone a long way in correcting the erroneous image of Africa.

18. His delegation was pleased to note that United Nations information centres were providing access to new information technology and staff training for developing countries. Such practices should extend to all information centres in the developing world, but should not lead to a disproportionate reduction in the production of conventional information materials or changes in the traditional services rendered by the centres. His delegation joined others in

reiterating the need for the process of integration of the United Nations information centres with UNDP offices to be carried out with caution and in close consultation with host Governments.

19. Mr. DOUGLAS (United States of America) said that new information technologies offered exciting new opportunities. His delegation welcomed the efforts by the Department of Public Information to utilize the vast resources of the Internet through the establishment of the United Nations home page, which had launched the Organization into the realm of cyberspace. However, priorities must be set to maintain or increase resources where they could do the most and reduce or cut resources where they were least needed. That was the core idea behind the need to review the operations of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library and the United Nations information centres. Conventional library systems were now obsolete, since information could be accessed more rapidly and more accurately from all parts of the world through the Internet. His delegation therefore looked forward to an independent library specialist reviewing the operations of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library and offering recommendations for it to take advantage of the latest information technologies. That would ultimately save the library scarce funds and increase its capability to reach its users.

20. The operations of the United Nations information centres needed to be reviewed in the light of the number of changes - new information technologies, availability of United Nations depository libraries and distance from headquarters offices. At a time of reduced resources, hard choices would have to be made about where to allocate funds. The review should concentrate on information centres in the developed world, since, in the developing world, information centres would remain a vital means of information dissemination.

21. His delegation shared the concern of the Department of Public Information about the fiscal impact of mandates that originated outside the Committee on Information, and supported the request in paragraph 29 of draft resolution B that all costs arising from such mandates should be identified.

22. Mr. ADAM (Israel) said that Israel recognized the importance of the free flow of information and the use of information sources to assist the development of all countries throughout the world. Each country needed to find a balance between the free use of information and circumstances where the rights of the individual might be endangered. The free flow of information could only exist within a pluralistic and democratic society and environment. The use of information must be free from political motives, and must remain independent of the establishment, which had clear political interests of its own. Information did not recognize boundaries between countries, and was one of the elements which made peace and cooperation between nations vital.

23. Israel was working for the advancement and development of computer programmes in the area of educational and information technology. Special software had been developed to train technicians and engineers. In the framework of international technical cooperation, Israel was assisting developing countries in advancing their own technical knowledge in various fields. Institutes in Israel were promoting joint studies between universities and research centres around the world for the advancement of peace and dialogue.

Information sources were being developed in the areas of economics, industry and agriculture for use in joint projects to benefit the entire Middle East.

24. His delegation welcomed the initiative of the Department of Public Information to assist the Palestinians and their advancement in the areas of media and information. Israel was ready to participate in those efforts. It called on all States Members to join in those programmes and hoped that the advancement of peace between nations would be forged through cooperation by research centres and non-governmental organizations. It called on its Arab neighbours to put aside their disputes with Israel and promote education and cooperation between peoples, free of political calculation.

25. Mr. BHANDARY (Nepal) said that information was a powerful tool for political, social and economic changes, and a free, pluralistic and independent press was a vital feature of a democratic society.

26. His delegation was encouraged to see the Department of Public Information's active engagement in collecting and disseminating accurate information about the United Nations. It supported the Department's ongoing reform and restructuring exercise which should be aimed at enhancing its public information capacity. His only concern was that the Department's mandate should not be affected.

27. The Department's publications, including press releases, should continue. The increased use of electronic media was welcome, although traditional media should not be discontinued. The role of United Nations radio was particularly important in reaching the remotest areas and producing the most direct impact. Nepal repeated its request for inclusion of the Nepali language. As a significant troop-contributing country, it believed that United Nations radio programmes, particularly those relating to peacekeeping operations, would greatly help the local population understand more about the Organization and its peace missions around the world.

28. The United Nations had recently been the target of criticism about its peacekeeping role; setbacks were highlighted by the media, while successes were neglected. It was important to retain the support of both the local population where peacekeeping operations were being conducted and the people of troop-contributing countries through dissemination of accurate information. The establishment of an interdepartmental working group on public information for peacekeeping and other field missions was an important beginning. Setting the Record Straight was another means of providing correct information. He suggested that the Department might include a tribute to those peacekeepers who had laid down their lives in the performance of their duties in a future edition of Blue Helmets.

29. Cooperation to reduce the existing communications and information disparities between developed and developing countries had not been as extensive as mandated by General Assembly resolution 50/31 A. South-South cooperation was important in that regard. The dissemination of accurate and objective information was necessary to enhance international understanding.

30. Mr. CASSAR (Malta) said that information was the basis of the growth and development of communities. Discussion of the item on information was a crucial

aspect of the work of the United Nations, especially in view of the rapid technological advances in that field. In the context of the United Nations, information should have a dual purpose: to transmit the image and ideals of the Organization and to be receptive to the world's concerns about how it was fulfilling its mandate. Of late, adverse public perception of the work of the United Nations, and of the Department of Public Information, had affected work.

31. The Department was receiving increasing demands for information on the Organization's activities, and he commended its efforts to respond under the leadership of the Assistant Secretary-General.

32. The Department's role in relation to peacekeeping operations was essential; the flow of information to and from conflict zones often determined the international community's ability to respond. Too often, the nature of the media business tended to highlight tragic events. The Department had an important role to play in compensating for the imbalance.

33. United Nations information centres remained important. Their outreach programmes promoted awareness, and the strengthening of relations with local media helped consolidate links between the United Nations and civil society. The recent use of the Internet was an example of wider outreach by innovative means.

34. The Department was operating in a climate of budgetary constraints. Further cuts generated legitimate concern about its ability to implement its mandate. The political will of Member States would not be adequately reflected if the quality and extent of service were diluted.

35. His delegation commended the Department on the training programme for Palestinian media practitioners. It noted, however, that the full scope of its mandate under resolution 50/84 C had suffered in many instances, and urged it to ensure full implementation. Increased use of modern electronic technologies could increase efficiency in the production of relevant publications. New avenues essential for the success of the peace process should be focused on; studies prepared by participants in United Nations-sponsored activities on Palestine provided raw material which had been underutilized.

36. While new information technologies should be adopted in the work of the Department, conventional methods should not be abandoned, especially in the developing world.

37. Ms. DURRANT (Jamaica), speaking on behalf of the 13 States members of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) which were Member States of the United Nations, said that technological innovations were concentrated mostly in developed countries, and were often beyond the reach of many developing countries. That disparity would affect the progress of development. Some nations would continue to face alarming levels of illiteracy and ignorance while others concerned themselves over universal access to sophisticated communications technologies.

38. The first challenge was to harness available technology to the betterment of mankind. Literacy and a thirst for access to information would only fuel greater deployment of the new technologies. The sooner that all were connected

to the information superhighway, the better for society as a whole. The efforts by United Nations agencies and governmental and non-governmental organizations to initiate programmes aimed at improving access to information and information technology, especially in developing countries, should be supported.

39. The United Nations should lead the way in using advanced communications systems and demonstrating their global impact.

40. Commendable progress had been made in interconnecting the United Nations system. In addition, a wide range of publications were now available on a same-day basis on the optical disk system. The Department should be encouraged to continue to explore new technologies to speed up the dissemination process and reduce the amount of information provided on paper.

41. The CARICOM delegations noted the collaboration between the United Nations and the private sector in testing new technologies aimed at enhancing the Organization's operations. Collaboration with industry leaders from both developed and developing countries aimed at improving the cost effectiveness of the Organization's activities should be encouraged.

42. The Department should continue its programme of publications designed to increase public awareness of the role and function of the Organization. It was heartening to note the emphasis placed on rationalizing services through the increased used of technology and the production of joint publications with other agencies.

43. The CARICOM delegations also welcomed the move to strengthen commercial distribution of publications; however, market-oriented strategies should not reduce access to vital information from the United Nations system.

44. In the same way, review of the operation of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, which should be carried out by a representative team of experts from developed and developing countries, should not hinder its role as a vital centre of information.

45. The crisis of perception of the United Nation's work should be corrected. While there was a genuine need for reform and renewal, the Organization had an indispensable role to play in global affairs. The Department should therefore pursue its mandate to improve the understanding of the work and purposes of the United Nations. Efforts should be made to exploit new opportunities in broadcasting, using cable and satellite delivery to reach new audiences, and the Department should seek to place more United Nations programming through existing channels. The Organization should seek to capture the attention and the imagination of peoples of all societies and backgrounds by making its message more attractive.

46. The CARICOM delegations recommended an increasingly proactive stance in dealing with negative images of the United Nations. The role and mission of the Organization needed to be clearly defined to all interested publics. It should absorb constructive criticism, but counter all baseless attacks forcefully. The Organization should earn the respect and support of the global audience on the basis of its work and record.

47. The information centres should be supported because the United Nations was a global body. The CARICOM delegations recommended that the Department of Information should explore ways of creating information mechanisms in UNDP offices to promote a greater understanding of the Organization in regions, such as the Caribbean, where one Centre had to cover territories that were sometimes 2,000 miles apart, and offered their collaboration. She singled out for special mention the Centre's bulletin on the activities of the United Nations agencies in the Caribbean and other new publications, and also expressed appreciation for the work of the Department's Caribbean radio unit in creating greater awareness of the United Nations and its work in that region.

48. Advances in the dissemination of information and increased access were a priority for all. The new information technologies should be used to deal with basic problems and improve the quality of life of all human beings, not just to advance the interests of the developed world.

49. The CHAIRMAN suggested that the Committee should adopt draft resolutions A and B contained in paragraph 47 of document A/51/21.

50. It was so decided.

51. Mr. SANBAR (Assistant Secretary-General for Public Information) said that he hoped to discuss special points of interest with each delegation, but would make the following general comments.

52. With regard to the United Nations information centres, the concern relating to the impact of the integration process on their activities would be looked into under the planned study. As for the Library, the study would be carried out with the same transparency.

53. He reassured delegations that even though the Department was advancing on the information highway, it would not overlook traditional means of disseminating information. The Department would also take into account the remarks concerning the use of different languages.

54. With regard to decolonization, 370 documents on the subject were currently available online.

55. In relation to delegations' concerns regarding the programme for Palestine, the Department was working closely with the bodies of the General Assembly to see that the resolution was implemented in the most cost-effective way, especially as the allocated funding had been reduced for the next period.

56. He appreciated all the Committee's positive remarks; they were important for his staff, who were the most important element of the Department.

The meeting rose at 4.20 p.m.